

The Role of the U.S. Geological Survey in Science Delivery to the National Park Service

Dennis B. Fenn, Southwest Biological Science Center, U.S. Geological Survey, 2255 North Gemini Drive, MS-9394, Flagstaff, Arizona 86001; denny_fenn@usgs.gov

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) was created on March 3, 1879, and signed into law by President Rutherford B. Hayes as a part of the appropriations bill for the fiscal year starting on July 1, 1879. The National Park Service (NPS) was created by organic act on August 25, 1916, and signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson. Thus, both agencies are venerable members of the Department of the Interior (DOI) family, with USGS preparing to celebrate its 125th anniversary next March.

These historical facts show that USGS has been around as a sister DOI agency during the entire history of NPS, and we know that the USGS has had an intimate relationship with NPS for much of that time. Many NPS units were added to the National Park System because of the unique and wonderful geology of the area, and NPS has often invited or welcomed USGS geologists to conduct research to help the agency better understand and interpret the physical features of the parks. In addition, numerous parks have stream gauges in place that are maintained by USGS, some of them now approaching almost 100 years of continuous record. Furthermore, topographic maps produced by USGS have long been a staple for both park management as well as park visitors desiring to hike into the backcountry.

All of these facts are true and accurate. However, it is also true that there has long been a certain tension between the two agencies and a certain frustration with USGS on the part of some NPS employees. I believe that three main factors have contributed to this somewhat rocky relationship between the two bureaus.

First, Congress did not expressly give USGS the mission to provide science support to other DOI agencies. Instead, USGS was charged with “classification of the public lands, and examination of the geologic structure, mineral resources, and products of the public domain.” When one considers that USGS worked for 37 years under this mission before NPS was even formed, and experienced the subsequent addition of a water

quantity determination function (i.e., stream gauging), and a topographic mapping function, both of which responsibilities also ranged well beyond DOI land holdings, one can understand how an agency culture developed within USGS over the years that seemed somewhat indifferent to NPS or other DOI agency needs.

Second, for a variety of reasons, including agency culture, General Accounting Office (GAO) audit rulings, federal procurement laws, and a reluctance on the part of Congress to appropriate administrative funds, a USGS business model developed that had a guiding principle that can be summarized in three simple but significant words, “blind to source,” when it came to deciding how much overhead to assess on outside money flowing into the agency. In other words, DOI agencies were charged the same overhead rate as non-DOI agencies. Many NPS managers simply found it too expensive to work with USGS, and resented the fact that the agency would not routinely grant a special, reduced overhead rate to a sister DOI bureau.

Lastly, the USGS generally utilized space rented from the General Services Administration (GSA) to house its employees rather than occupy buildings on DOI-owned lands. This tended to isolate USGS scientists from other DOI employees and make difficult the kind of frequent interactions that land management agencies prefer. Even the USGS headquarters offices were moved out of Main Interior, and later out of Washington, D.C., altogether, to a beautiful wooded campus in Reston, Virginia, more than 23 miles from

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downtown D.C. This move, as nice as it was for many employees, who could now live close to work and avoid a lengthy commute, further isolated the agency from its sister bureaus and added to the perception of USGS aloofness.

Even given that past, however, several recent events have considerably reshaped the future possibilities. These events have given renewed hope that USGS will now start to play a much greater role in providing science support to her sister DOI agencies, including NPS. We now have every reason to believe that the past will not be a prologue to the future. Let us now review four of these events.

First, on October 1, 1996, Congress merged the former National Biological Service (NBS) into the USGS and created the Biological Resources Division, or BRD. The BRD joined with the Water Resources, Geology, and National Mapping divisions to form a nearly full-service research bureau unmatched anywhere else in the federal sector. Since BRD traces its lineage to several parent DOI bureaus, it has a strong DOI service ethic already entrenched in its subculture. BRD immediately set about trying to inculcate that DOI service ethic into the culture of the larger USGS. Over the past six and a half years we have made slow but steady progress in this.

Second, with the merger of NBS into USGS, the secretary of the interior formally charged the agency with the responsibility to serve the scientific needs of all DOI bureaus. Finally, after 124 years, the USGS now has a clear and unambiguous mission to serve DOI bureaus as well as the public domain in toto.

Third, when the NBS was merged into the USGS, the secretary agreed that the former NBS policy of 0% assessment on DOI funds coming into BRD would remain in force. In other words, USGS now contained a major sector that was no longer “blind to source” when it came to reimbursable income. This set a precedent that would prove to have a major impact on the long-term relationship between USGS and other DOI bureaus, as we will see in event number four.

Fourth, on February 10, 2003, USGS formally adopted a new standard assessment pol-

icy for DOI funding. From this time forward, USGS will charge only 15% overhead on any sister DOI agency funding provided to the survey. In other words, the entire survey is no longer “blind to source,” and will charge this special, reduced rate to all DOI agencies. The only downside to this new policy is that BRD will no longer charge the special 0% rate, but will be required to use the common business practice rate of 15%. However, since NPS and other DOI bureaus readily pay the same 15% rate to Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) research partners around the country, this new BRD overhead rate should not be a major problem for those bureaus. Since the rate formerly charged by Water, Geology, and Mapping was considerably higher than 15%, this new rate will save DOI agencies a lot of money each year, thus offsetting part or all of the increased cost of working with BRD. This new policy was approved by the secretary, as well as by both the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Congress, before it was adopted by USGS. On the whole, I believe that this new USGS overhead policy will prove to be a good thing for NPS.

Today USGS is more willing and more able to meet NPS science needs than ever before. The entire survey is available to meet NPS needs on a reimbursable basis at an assessment rate equal to what NPS would pay to use a CESU. This allows NPS to carefully consider, with a level playing field, what research tool might best serve its needs in a given instance. Furthermore, BRD still maintains most of the former NPS scientists stationed in the parks or universities where they were when NBS was formed almost 10 years ago. In addition, the many other biologists at our science centers stand ready to help on NPS issues when asked to do so. Scientists in the other USGS disciplines also stand ready to assist NPS when needed, and now at a more competitive rate than ever before. Finally, the FY04 president's budget, now before Congress, has a line item in it for increased USGS funding to support DOI bureaus. This is a modest beginning, at a total of approximately \$3 million, but it demonstrates USGS commitment to developing funding sources to

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use to cost-share with DOI bureaus on science needs in the future.

In summary, I urge NPS to remain aggressive and insistent in encouraging USGS science support for parks. In 1940, most of the small cadre of nine NPS wildlife researchers were transferred to the Biological Survey, the precursor to today's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which was then assigned the responsibility to meet NPS science needs in the wildlife management area. We all know that this plan did not work out very well in the end. I have often wondered whose fault that out-

come may have been. In any case, we do not want the past to once again become a prologue to the future. USGS stands ready to do its part, and I encourage NPS to likewise keep the partnership strong. Keep in mind that NPS made a \$20 million investment in USGS-BRD that is too valuable to walk away from or to be allowed to drift away. All in all, I believe that this is a very positive time in the history of interactions between USGS and her sister bureaus within DOI, including NPS.

